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SUBJECT: RELIGION IN XIAMEN: TRUE TO FORM, OFFICIAL NUMBERS
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¶1. (SBU) Summary. During a visit to Xiamen's religious
affairs bureau, an official provided numbers that, almost
certainly, underestimate the true size of Xiamen's flocks.
The official also stressed the separation between education
and religion in Xiamen, and that there were no formal links
between Xiamen's Catholics and the Vatican. End summary.

¶2. (U) On April 27, Congenoff met with Vice Section Chief
Zeng Wenying, of the Xiamen Nationalities and Religious
Affairs Bureau, to discuss the state of religion in the
city. All of China's five official religions -- Buddhism,
Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam and Taoism -- are present
in Xiamen. Each religion has a local association in Xiamen,
except for the Protestants, who have two. (Note: All of
these associations are essentially local chapters of
national religious organizations. End note.) There are
1,524 religious venues in Xiamen, and these are administered
directly by the religious associations.

Buddhists, unsurprisingly, top the list

¶3. (U) According to Zeng, the six associations together
muster some 70,000 believers. They include 40,000
Buddhists, 20,000 Protestants, 2,700 Muslims and 700
Catholics; the number of Taoists is "difficult to
calculate." The different groups "coexist peacefully" and
are "free of any government interference." Based on an
untrained observation of the crowd leaving the local mosque
on a Friday afternoon, a significant proportion of Xiamen's
Muslim population hails from China's northwest.

Lots of monks

¶4. (U) To serve the needs of these believers, there are
approximately 600 religious professionals in Xiamen. These
include 530 Buddhists, 56 Protestants, four Catholics, three
Muslims and "twenty-odd" Taoists. Xiamen is also home to
Minnan Buddhist College, which forms aspiring monks,
currently enrolling 320 students, 200 of which are female.

For our foreign friends

¶5. (U) Noting that many foreign-invested companies call
Xiamen home, Zeng mentioned that there is a Christian church
that caters to the needs of local expatriates. Meeting at a

local hotel, it offers services in English every Sunday, drawing between 100 and 200, mostly American, followers. Entry to this service is only granted to foreign passport holders. (Note: Dell and Kodak both operate large facilities in Xiamen. The city also has a small diplomatic community. End note.)

Unofficial religions

¶16. (U) Zeng acknowledged there are also some unofficial religions in Xiamen. Asked whether these were mostly of Christian inspiration, Zeng clarified that these religions were not unofficial variants of any of the five recognized religions. What we were talking about, said Zeng, were "folk religions," without "strict rules," that worshipped ancestors, historic figures or "multiple gods."

How Catholic can the Catholics be?

¶17. (U) Asked about the relationship between the local Catholic community and the Vatican, Zeng stated that, although it is acknowledged that Catholics "worship and respect" the Pope, there are no direct links between the local Catholics and Rome.

The thorny question of religious education

¶18. (SBU) Turning to the issue of religious education in Xiamen, a somewhat defensive Zeng stated that it is national policy to separate education and religion. There is no religious education in public schools, and parochial schools are banned. Zeng mentioned that some religious groups have

GUANGZHOU 00013576 002 OF 002

organized activities such as summer camps, but admitted that type of event was relatively infrequent.

¶19. (SBU) Asked about Sunday schools or similar activities that could complement children's secular education, Zeng replied, with just a hint of irritation, that, "in Xiamen, most Christian followers are adults." Nonetheless, children can attend and listen to services.

¶10. (U) Later that day, during a visit to the Protestant New District Gospel Church of Xiamen, the congregation's senior pastor, Li Lihui, said that the church did not offer Sunday school or any similar activity geared towards children. The church building did have a couple of playrooms, where children could stay during Sunday services.

Comment: Once again, numbers off

¶11. (SBU) As in other localities within our consular district, Xiamen's official numbers on religion do not seem to gel with the reality on the ground. According to the municipal labor bureau, Xiamen's population tops 2.25 million. This means that, even tripling the number of registered believers, less than 6% of Xiamen's population practices Buddhism. The frenzied level of activity found during a recent visit to Nanputuo Temple seriously calls this into question. In all likelihood, there are scores of unregistered Buddhists and Christians, either because they do not care to formalize their allegiance or because they disagree in principle with the idea of registration. Alternatively, their participation in religious activity may be partial, casual or both. Post does not believe this underestimation is evidence of any malicious intent on either the believers' or government's part, to hide the true extent of the general population's religious devotion. Nonetheless, the official numbers almost certainly present an incomplete picture of Xiamen's religiosity.

